

Practical

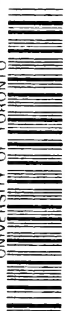
Play-writing

AND

The Cost of Production

ALFRED C. CALMOUR

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

W. DAVENPORT ADAMS

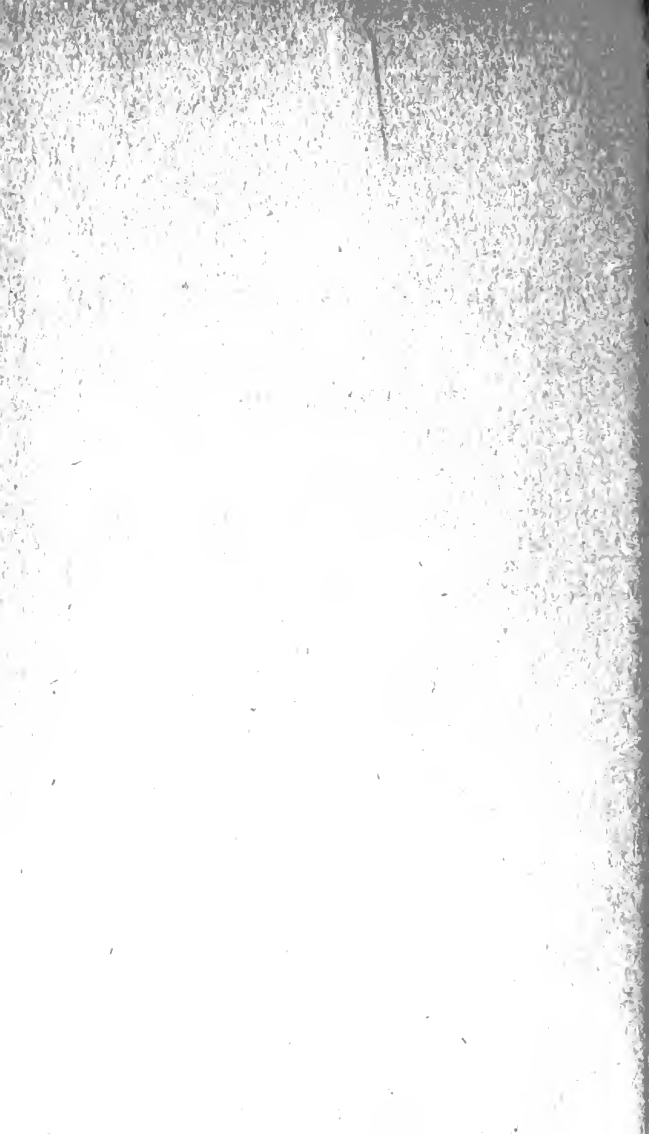


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PRACTICAL PLAY-WRITING.



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PRACTICAL
PLAY-WRITING

AND

The Cost of Production.

BY

ALFRED C. CALMOUR,

AUTHOR OF

"THE AMBER HEART," "CYRENE," "THE GAY LOTHARIO,"

"CUPID'S MESSENGER,"

ETC.

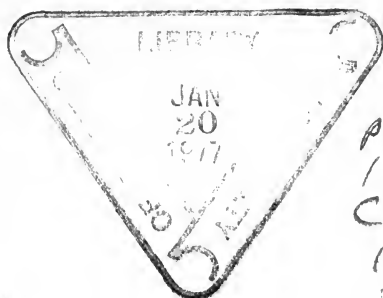
With an Introduction by WM. DAVENPORT ADAMS.

BRISTOL

J. W. ARROWSMITH, PRINTER, QUAY STREET.

LONDON

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT & CO. LIMITED.



*This Paper was delivered by the Author,
by request, at the Playgoers' Club, and
at Professor Herkomer's School of Art,
Bushey. 1891.*

TO THE GREATEST ACTOR

OF THE TIME

HENRY IRVING

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED.

INTRODUCTION.

THE subject treated in this volume is one on which the Author is well qualified to speak. Though he has secured most popular approval as a writer of plays written in verse and dealing with poetic *motifs*, he has had much practice in various dramatic methods, and has always devoted much attention to dramatic technique. His career as an acted playwright began in 1879, when he brought out his "Only a Dream," which has been followed by his "Trust and Trial" (1880), "A

Woman's Heart" (1881), "Law not Justice" (1882), "Wives" (1883), "Broken Bonds" (1883), "Homespun" and "Cupid's Messenger" (1884), "Love's Martyrdom" and "Elsa Dene" (1886), "The Amber Heart" (1887)—in which Miss Ellen Terry made so great a success—"The Widow Winsome" (1888), "Cyrene" (1890), and "The Gay Lothario" (1891). Among these pieces will be found examples, not only of the poetic, but of the "present, day" play—not only of tragedy, but of strong drama and light comedy. Mr. Calmour has had, throughout, the advantage of being

himself an actor, and of having, in that capacity, played many parts, both in London and in the country. He has always shown, consequently, a keen eye for theatrical structure and effect, writing especially with a view to the "acting" qualities of his plays. Further, he has had much experience in the placing of plays upon the stage, most of his own work having been "produced" under his immediate direction. This has given him an insight into the processes of play production (pecuniary as well as artistic) which cannot but make his advice and information eminently serviceable to

his readers. Though the best-known of his pieces are full of fancy, Mr. Calmour is a practical man, both as a playwright and as a "producer" of plays; and, in the lecture that follows, he gives the public the benefit of the knowledge he has laboriously acquired.

WM. DAVENPORT ADAMS.

November, 1891.

COMPENDIUM.

| | <i>Page</i> |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| The Purpose of the Paper . . . | 2 |
| A Glance at the Early Dramatists . | 3 |
| The Stage in Shakespeare's Time . | 5 |
| From Shakespeare to Sheridan Knowles | 7 |
| The Initial Dramatic Idea . . . | 8 |
| The Elaboration of that Idea . . . | 11 |
| The Selection of Character and Story | 13 |
| Plays of Character and Plays of Plot | 15 |
| Of the Development of Character . | 16 |
| Interest and Sympathy . . . | 18 |
| Of the Writing of Dialogue . . . | 19 |
| The Construction of Speeches . . . | 21 |
| On Dramatic Literature . . . | 28 |
| A Many-sided Character . . . | 31 |
| Dramatic Contrast . . . | 32 |
| The After-dinner Reading . . . | 33 |
| The One-act Play . . . | 34 |
| On Inventing "Business" . . . | 35 |
| Mr. Boucicault's Plays . . . | 37 |

| | <i>Page.</i> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Writing for certain Theatres and Artists | 38 |
| One-part Plays and " Situations " . | 40 |
| The Selection of Actors and Actresses | 42 |
| Mr. Sidney Grundy's method of Play-writing | 43 |
| Mr. Arthur W. Pinero's method of Play-writing | 45 |
| Play Production | 46 |
| The Difficulties of Obtaining a Hearing | 47 |
| The Dramatic Crusade | 48 |
| Mr. W. G. Wills's Experience | 51 |
| The London Manager | 53 |
| Do Not be Discouraged | 54 |
| Morning Performances | 55 |
| Their Actual Cost | 56 |
| "The Widow Winsome," "Cyrene," "The Amber Heart" | 57 |
| The General Public at Matinées | 57 |
| Matinée Rehearsals | 58 |
| Concluding Remarks | 60 |

Practical Play-writing

AND

THE COST OF PRODUCTION.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,—I remember reading, when a lad, a book entitled *Stepping Stones to Great Events*. It was an unpretentious little work, written in a simple and unaffected style, but it seemed to me to fulfil its purpose admirably—that purpose being to instruct the youthful student in the rudiments of history. The book was not written for accomplished scholars; it was merely a finger-post, as it were, directing the uninstructed mind to higher paths of knowledge. The paper on “Practical Play-writing,” which I am about to

read to you, claims to serve no higher purpose than that aimed at by the little book referred to. It is not written for the instruction of the master craftsman—the tried and successful dramatist: it is merely a finger-post by which I shall endeavour to direct the inexperienced tyro in play-writing to those higher paths of Dramatic Art, where he will be able to study by himself the different creative and constructive processes practised by dramatists whose names have been enrolled upon the scroll of Fame.

It is not my intention to give a lengthy and wearisome account of the dramatists of the past, but I will just mention the names of one or two, for purposes of illustration, and then pass on to the more practical portion of my paper.

The founder of the drama proper, and I think I may add, the first practical dramatist, was that acute Athenian general, Æschylus. Perceiving the influence over the masses exercised by two Icarians, Thespis the tragedian, and Susarion the performer of comedy, he foresaw the good that might result from regulated performances. Accordingly he built a theatre—very much after the fashion of our theatres, except that it was too large for a roof—and wrote his sublime tragedies for public representation. It was he who gave the names to the different parts of the theatre, such as Scenery, Proscenium, and Orchestra, and he was the first to establish on the stage groups and dialogues. Later, the young Sophocles wrested the Government prize in dramatic poetry from Æschylus,

and introduced a softer and sunnier style. With this more humanising portrayal of the passions of mankind, a great advance was made in the practice of play-writing. The progress which, since those early times, had been made in the writing and constructing of plays when John Heywood, in Henry the Eighth's reign, gave us the first secular pieces—*The Four P's*, written by himself, and *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, supposed to have been written by Still—is generally known. While fully appreciating the magnificent dramatic work done by Chapman, Decker, Massinger, Ford, and the best of them all, Christopher Marlowe, I am bound to say that it was not until Shakespeare appeared, to "bombast out a blank verse," as Greene contemptuously puts it, that

any great advance was made in play-writing. Shakespeare, with his marvellous dramatic instinct, and a stage training carried out under the eye of his fellow-townsmen Richard Burbage, soon modified and changed the existing rules of play construction.

Conceive, now, a stage surrounded on three sides by the audience—unfurnished with scenery or other aids to theatrical illusion—and then, in imagination, set yourselves the task of writing a piece to be played under such conditions. Every practical playwright knows that the greatest dramatic achievement possible is to hold the interest of an audience enchained by force of dialogue and power of acting. Shakespeare and his interpreters have done this, not only in the bygone centuries, but up

to a very recent period; and I am unable to discover any dramatist, before or after Shakespeare's time, who has accomplished the same feat.

Of the plays written by the dramatists of the Restoration—those sensualists, Sedley, Etherege, Wycherly, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar—I need not speak. Oliver Goldsmith was the first author to stem this tide of nasty suggestiveness by producing pure plays; and no better corrective to the debasing influence of this legacy of lewdness could be found than in *She Stoops to Conquer* and *The Good-Natured Man*. In Sheridan I recognise a master in the art of Practical Play-writing. In stagecraft he was head and shoulders above his immediate predecessors, and I know no better piece of tech-

nical constructive work than *The School for Scandal*. The "Screen scene" alone will afford young playwrights a liberal education, if they will but study the gradual elaboration and development of the powerful plot.

I will now pass on to Knowles and Bulwer Lytton. The latter dramatist I consider to be the best constructor of plays in the first half of the present century. For the constructive powers of Dion Boucicault I have the highest admiration, and I may here say that it was from him I received my first lessons in Practical Play-writing. Of some more recent authors I shall have cause to speak during the reading of this paper, so I will proceed at once to give you my (perhaps immature) views of the Playwright's art.

I have not divided this paper into heads, but during its progress I shall briefly touch upon such themes as—
The initial dramatic idea. The elaboration of that idea into a skeleton plot. The completed scenario. The selection of characters that will admit of dramatic development. The selection of incidents that will admit of dramatic development. The value of contrast in characterisation. The light and shade in dramatic composition. The story play, and the play dependent upon the development of character. The one-part play. The quality of dramatic literature. Different methods of construction; illustrated, I am pleased to say, by letters from Mr. Sidney Grundy and Mr. A. W. Pinero. Then I shall touch upon—The difficulties of obtaining a hearing. The trial *matinée* and cost

of production. The selection of cast, and the direction of stage rehearsals.

The first thing to be done by the dramatic author in embryo, is to get a central idea—a germ, as it were. These germs of thought come to one at odd occasions, and are suggested by every conceivable object and action. I find walking the best means of stimulating my imagination—the incidents of the plot developing and assimilating themselves as I proceed. Sometimes the germ is entirely evolved out of one's inner consciousness—or one takes the hint from historical incidents, from ballads, mythological tales, or the work of some existing author. Just to show you how these dramatic ideas sometimes germinate, I will take the idea of my play *The Amber Heart*, and let you see how I arrived at it. The germ came

to me by the merest chance—a casual conversation with an unhappy woman, who yearned for the return of the simple innocent pleasures of her joyous girlhood. From that bare idea developed the story of the sensitive girl whose life was protected from the pangs and delights of love by an amulet—the amulet being symbolical of innocence—who, having cast aside the little heart, loved as other women, and felt all the misery of brutal betrayal. The recovery of the amulet, and the return of the poor child to her former blissful ignorance, is again merely symbolical of Time, which assuages all griefs.

As another illustration, I will take the idea of my trifle *The Gay Lothario*. A friend of mine loved a woman, and called upon her with 'the view of asking her to marry him. He was

informed by her sister that she intended to refuse him. Hearing this, my friend determined to turn the tables upon her, and he did it by informing his lady-love when she came in that he had only called to tell her how sorry he was for having beguiled her into believing he cared for her, and that he could never make her his wife. From these bare facts the author develops the more elaborate skeleton; and having once seized upon a dramatic idea, the next thing he has to do is to elaborate it, and evolve from that idea a continuity of story, from which will *naturally* develop characters and situations. I may here state that in the selection of story and incidents, and their development, only events which *must* happen should find a place in dramatic writing.

At the beginning of one's career the plot cannot be too carefully and exhaustively worked out, for many managers will read a completed scenario written by a tyro when they would refuse to read the finished play. Personally I always develop a most elaborate plot, especially when writing a play of modern life. Some of my plots would take three-quarters of an hour to read; and, if I were to lose one, another dramatist could readily take it up and finish the play. The absence of an elaborate plot is very often the cause of considerable doubt and difficulty when an author is called upon to complete the unfinished posthumous work of another. I remember my friend Mr. W. G. Wills had great difficulty in completing the fourth act of a play, the first three of which had already been

written. Not having the slightest idea how the dead author intended to finish the play, Mr. Wills had to invent new incidents, and end it as his own artistic instincts directed him. Had a sketch of the play in its entirety been left, this doubt and difficulty would not have arisen. I dwell upon this, because both Mr. Grundy and Mr. Pinero have something to say on the subject.

The young dramatist having selected a story that will freely lend itself to dramatic development, and having chosen characters that will best illustrate this story, he will then proceed to marshal his incidents into acts—to crystallize, as it were, these dramatic particles into a solid, tangible whole. Although it is unnecessary to terminate each act with what is known as a “curtain situation,” yet

the fall of the curtain should be so contrived, in telling the story, as to leave the audience in a state of interested suspense. But the principal duty of the dramatist, as I understand it, is to sustain the interest of his auditors by the humanity of his characters, and by the freshness and originality of his story, and not by claptrap "curtains."

On the unities of time and place in a play, I shall not dwell, because in practical play-writing the consideration of such rules scarcely enters. I may therefore dismiss the theme by saying that so long as an author does not outrage the feelings of his audience by making two consecutive scenes in one act occur at an interval, say, of a month, a week, or even a day, or make his second scene take place at an earlier period of time

than his first, he will be readily forgiven for any other breach of these antiquated laws. ! ! !

Before I proceed further, I should state that there are plays in which the characters are subordinated to the plot, and others in which the characterisation dominates the story. Another class embodies both character and story, but of this I will not speak.

Taking the plays in which the characters are of secondary importance to the plot, the development of character need only be carried so far as it lends bare life and interest to the drama ; the success of such a drama depends upon the complication of story and the powerfully worked-up-to situations. The audience for which this class of play is written simply demands an exciting piece,

the action being so rapid as to preclude any subtlety of characterisation. But, on the other hand, where the characterisation predominates, the dramatist will have to make most of his characters full-length portraits. A wrongfully-accused hero raving of his wrongs through five long acts, and a persecuted heroine whining through many scenes, will not satisfy; the audience before whom such a play is set will demand higher qualities in these characters. They will want to see the workings of the heart and mind expressed in adequate language; they may even demand exalted dialogue; and the author, if he aim at success, must be capable of expressing the human passions in language simple, powerful, and direct.

It will thus be seen that the easier task for the young author would be

to produce that class of play which appeals to an emotional audience. I should direct his attention to melodrama, because by the study of its laws he may become *practically* acquainted with the technicalities of the craft.

The technicalities of dramatic writing can be easily acquired by study. To acquire that study the dramatist has only to frequent the theatres, or to get direct information from anyone connected with the stage, be he actor, author, or manager. But study will not give him dramatic instinct, which is a quality often confounded with stagecraft. *Dramatic instinct is a rare gift; stagecraft is only rare because few authors take the trouble to acquire it.*

But to return to the point where I had left the young dramatist with his plot mapped out into acts. Having

done this, he must then develop his principal characters ; and let the tyro bear this in mind, that these *principal* characters, whether hero, heroine, or their contrasts, must grow in interest as the play progresses ; that everything, and, indeed, every other character, must be subordinated to the interest of these personifications ; they must be the centre of his dramatic system, and an unqualified failure will undoubtedly be the result of any deviation from this law.

Having framed his play upon this progressive basis, the next step to take is to invest the characters with life. By life I mean dialogue ; by life I mean temperament ; by life I mean those rapid transitions of feeling which are found in the great dramatists, but which must always be present in a more or less degree. I will take the

hero of the story (and the same law applies to the heroine): the primary thing to do is to invest that character, firstly, with interest, and, secondly, with sympathy. Having once interested the audience and won their attention, the writer can then easily appeal to and command sympathy.

Red Pott

I will suppose now that the dramatist, having shaped out his story into acts, thoroughly worked out the motives for the maintenance of his dramatic action, and got a complete skeleton of the play before him, is now ready to clothe it with flesh—that is, dialogue. I cannot suggest a better rule to an author writing for the stage than to forget in his first draft that he *is* writing for the theatre. Presupposing that he has selected characters for his work with whom he is acquainted, and imbued them

with passions that he has felt, the simple thing to do is to make them talk as he instinctively feels they would talk.

I know that some authors make their characters talk as they, the authors, would do in such and such situations; but these characters are merely puppets and not worthy the name of creations, although many a successful play has been built up of these "talking machines." For plays in which the characters are of the first importance, the dialogue, although dramatic, need not be boiled down to the very heart, as it were; and where the author has the gift of fancy and command of language, he can to some extent deviate from the direct road, although in a young author this is dangerous, and the more dangerous because it is so tempting.

One very important point is in the artistic selection of dialogue; that is, the choice of situations *necessitating* a variety of expression, and *compelling* the dramatist to vary the character of his dialogue. Then, as each act requires careful working up to an interesting termination, so in the construction of speeches the same steadily progressive strength should be developed until the final syllable; and great care should be taken in the selection of every word and line. Each set speech is an act in miniature, and requires proportionately as much care in the working out.

I hope that I shall be pardoned if I try to exemplify my meaning by quoting a few speeches from my verse plays. My first extract shall be from my piece *Cyrene*. The theme is on the power and uselessness of Gold;

and the scene between "Zembra," the Alchemist, and "Moretus," the physician, runs as follows :

"Zembra " speaks first :

" Gold is the great magician of the world
To which all pay obsequious service,
And for its sake the noblest in the land,
Warriors and statesmen, judges and divines,
Will court damnation. Think, Moretus,
think

What power would then be mine who could
command

This precious talisman. Earth, air, and sea
Would yield their choicest growths at my
desire.

I should be greater than those mystic fates
Who sway the destinies of human kind ;
I should be God, and men would worship
me."

" Moretus " answers him :

" The God that you upraised would turn all
men

Against your wretched life. The fear of death
Would dog you ev'rywhere: by day, by night,

Awake or sleeping, you would be accurs'd.
This yellow dross has power to corrupt
And sow the deadly seeds of carnal vice ;
But to reclaim the brutal and the base
'Tis worthless as the dust. Gold cannot
buy
Affection or the faithfulness of men,
Or bring oblivion to the guilty mind ;
It cannot ward off sickness from a king
Whose single word can send great legions
forth ;
And when the last hour comes, and ev'ry sin
Beats on the feeble brain, not all the gold
In twenty million worlds can keep back
death."

My second extract shall be from
The Amber Heart. It is a scene in
which the poet, "Silvio," tries to
justify to the philosopher, "Coranto,"
his heartless treatment of "Ellaline."

"Coranto" speaks first :

Coranto.

So you would justify a theft of life,
And hopeless bankrupt make a woman's
heart,

With its rich treasury of love and trust,
To purchase empty fame."

Silvio.

"I am a poet,
And look on Nature, animate and dead,
As means to one great end."

Coranto.

"What is that end?"

Silvio.

"To teach mankind a knowledge of itself!
The infinite capacity within
For evil or for good. Man is supreme
When he can stay the wasteful hand of
Time,
And set the fleeting glories of his kind
Within a deathless shrine. That is my bent!
I'd bare each passion, analyse each sense,
Weigh every heart-beat in the panting
breast
Of her who suffered most for love of me,
To make my name immortal among men
And in their memory live eternally!"

Coranto.

"There are no bounds to your presumption;
You talk of man as if he were a god,

And could outlive a petty sum of years.
Stand but upon the summit of a cliff
And mark what pigmies men and women look
Upon the beach a hundred yards beneath ;
Then think of Nature's awful majesty,
The vastness of her realm, her life eternal,
And in that contemplation find humility.
About us are a hundred million worlds,
All whirling in an endless round of space ;
Mighty upheavals daily give sweet life
To species still undreamt of here on earth ;
And yet the boundless arrogance of man
Would claim, by right, for his especial use,
The sun, the moon, the starry firmament,
And all the grandeur of the universe !"

My last example shall be for the benefit of the ladies. It is the advice of one girl to another as to the proper treatment of that changeable creature "man," and it comes from my *Cupid's Messenger* :

"Maids must win husbands, when they are in
love,
By all the cunning of their simple hearts.

'Tis fit it should be so.

A man—trust one who knows—is only caught
By careful study of his temperament;
Fashioning thy wit, thy modesty, thy guile,—
Like a church vane, that moves with ev'ry
wind,—

To catch his changeful humour. Note his
moods.

When he is coy—a virtue rare in men—
With his best rival dance a minuet;—
'Twill prove the surest way to loose his
tongue.

When sad, affect a winsome playfulness,
That shall do more to win him from his spleen,
Than plaintive sighs or tearful sympathy.
If he should yawn, and weariness display,
Incite him to some deed of chivalry,
By urging: 'Thus my Lord of So-and-so
did;'

Or take thy lute and strum a melody,
Or aught to quicken his dull, lagging pulse—
But if withal he melts not i' the sun,
Still freezing 'neath thy studied blandish-
ments,

Tell him go seek the nearest gallows-tree,
And straightway hang himself!"

In these speeches I have endeavoured to give a growing significance to each line, reaching what I conceived to be the *crescendo* of strength in the final one.

As an illustration of what I consider to be the quintessence of dramatic expression, I will instance a line in *Macbeth*. In the first interview between "Macbeth" and his Queen, "Macbeth" says, "Duncan comes here to-night." "And when goes hence?" inquires "Lady Macbeth." "To-morrow, as he purposes," is the reply. Then "Lady Macbeth" answers, "Never shall sun that morrow see."

"*Never shall sun that morrow see.*" Here is a line pregnant with meaning. The ambitious Queen's mind is laid bare, and her motive made as clear as if her heart were in one's hand.

Other dramatists would have devoted long speeches to explaining this key to her intention, but the master dramatist of all time makes it apparent in just six words.

While on the subject of dialogue and forms of dramatic expression, I should like to say a word about the literary drama. I confess that I do not quite understand the exact meaning of the modern term "literature" as applied to plays, and I am afraid that others share my feeling of doubt. Some good folk seem to imagine that literature is but another name for artificiality, turgidity, and rhodomontade. They would have the characters in plays talk the language of the brain, not of the heart; they would filter and polish what little nature these characters originally had till they became mere

human machines, giving off, at regular intervals, artificial pathos, artificial passion, and artificial gaiety.

And let aspirants to dramatic authorship bear this in mind—that *spontaneity of thought and simplicity of expression are the very life of dramatic work*. Let them avoid long-winded disquisitions, tiresome explanations, and exasperating metaphors; let them put the author on one side, and be within the heart of each character; and let them also remember that rapidity of action is as essential to dramatic completeness as food is to the sustenance of life.

But there is no necessity to sacrifice the development of character for rapidity of action, unless the play put together be a sensational one. Playgoers will even forgive a little slowness of action if the dialogue be

fresh, simple, and powerful—if the characters be human, and if their sympathies be in any way touched. Literature will not appease them—certainly not the bookish literature generally introduced in dramatic work. For my part, I think such pedantic bloodless treatment even more objectionable in a play than triteness or commonplace.

II.

I now come to that portion of my paper which treats of the development of character, and the light and shade in dramatic composition.

It should be the aim of the dramatist to create (partly by dialogue) a character that is many-sided. For instance, in one's first act the hero might be bright, cheerful, with dashes of comedy; in the second act, his gaiety might give place to pathos or passion, varied by touches of gaiety; and in the last acts the tragedy of the character might be brought out by gradation. This I would call a many-sided character. One's heroine, too, might be gentle, winsome, gay, pathetic, and passionate by turns;

and although many great "parts" have been built up by harping on the one string of pathos, yet such a character could only form part of a scheme in which some other character would furnish the comedy, and not the scheme itself. Of course in characters of comedy, in which comic action is the end and aim of a playwright, stern pathos can hardly have a place; yet touches of semi-pathos, if I might use the word, form a pleasing relief to the most exhilarating personality. And one cannot too strongly impress upon a playwright the *necessity for contrast*, for light and shade in the scheme of the plot, or *dramatis personæ*. How skilfully many of our old dramatists worked out this artistic scheme of character! To them it was as colour was to the old masters.

Having completed one act of a play, with all its length of dialogue, the author would do well to read it aloud, or, better still, to get some one *who cannot read dramatically* to read it to him. By this means he will arrive at the very worst aspect of his effort, and will be enabled to tell where the dialogue wants cutting. It is not a bad plan, where one can victimise one's friends, to drop in after dinner, and get them to take small doses of the play, watching observantly whether your pathetic or comic scenes produce their intended effect or deep slumber; but no test applicable before production can be so severe as the test after it. And it is as well to know one's weaknesses before, and so make preparations to amend them. I think with Molière, that one's cook, if one pos-

sess such a luxury, is a capital critic. Any stage-manager or actor of experience would in one reading tell an author if his play were practical or not; but it is necessary to know if the play be interesting as well as practical, since unreasoning audiences accept or reject without argument.

It is obvious, although I have not spoken of it, that an aspirant to dramatic honours had better commence with a one-act play, formed on some simple basis, with three or four characters and limited action. And although dramatists do sometimes blossom out with three- or four-act successes, yet the same dramatists have written one-act pieces (acted or not). Personally, I have written some six; and although such plays only command a few shillings

nightly in the shape of royalty, yet many a one-act piece has proved for its author the stepping-stone to fame and fortune.

I now come to what is known as the "business" of a play, and I wish to impress upon you the importance of giving *variety* to this "business," as well as to the dialogue and action. In this branch of dramatic writing, it is a decided advantage to have had some experience as an actor, or, at least, to have studied stagecraft under a practical man. No one but an experienced dramatist knows the importance of breaking up each scene with some original "business." By business I mean some action or opportunity of doing something. Many a great effect has been obtained by "business" alone, and I cannot give a better

instance of this than in *Olivia*, in the scene where "Olivia" strikes "Thornhill." This effect gave Miss Ellen Terry one of her best chances. Again, there was a beautiful bit of "business" in *Sunlight and Shadow*, where the cripple, seeing in the mirror the woman he loves kissed by another, drops the flowers she has asked him to arrange on the mantel. I could multiply instances of this kind of effective "business" in plays, but these examples will no doubt suffice to convey what I mean.

There is another kind of "business," however, which enables an author to "ring down his curtain" on a situation much more effectively than if dialogue were spoken. Some of the happiest effects in the late Tom Robertson's plays were got by sugges-

tive "business," on and off the stage; and an author cannot heighten the illusion in a better way than by appropriate "business," whether it be instrumental music, solo singing, or a chorus of voices. This knowledge of effect is a gift, and can only come intuitively, of course always excepting those commonplace effects seen in scores of melodramas. For the purposes of acquiring a knowledge of stage business I could not recommend a more practical course than the study of Mr. Boucicault's plays. As a master of technique, the author of *London Assurance*, *Rip Van Winkle*, *The Streets of London*, &c., is unequalled.

I believe that the rudiments of dramatic authorship can be acquired without going behind the scenes at all; but it saves endless time and trouble if one can go behind and

study "from the life," as it were. Perhaps one of the most difficult branches of dramatic art is the development of character and the increase of interest in your hero or heroine, act by act.

I will suppose that the play be written, and submitted to a manager or actor. The first thing the manager or actor will do is to see what "parts" there are in the play, whether the principal rôle be male or female, and whether that rôle grows in interest. And it will be well for me at this point to warn young dramatists against an unhappy selection of theatre for their play. I would advocate the writing of a play for a particular set of artists or theatre, well aware that there is a feeling dead against this fitting of theatre or artist (the latter especially) with a

play or a part. I honestly believe that Shakespeare wrote his great characters for men whom, he knew, could do them justice. Burbage, Lowin, Taylor, Kempe, and Condell were to him what Mr. Irving, Mr. Barrett, Mr. Tree, Mr. Willard, Mr. Alexander, and Mr. Edward Terry would be to Mr. Wills or Mr. Grundy, Mr. Jones or Mr. Pinero.

A play may be great and succeed without aiming at this special writing, but the greatest plays are those which contain great characters, and which necessitate fine acting. How often have I heard that one should not write for a special person ! Let the student look at the Elizabethan drama, and see what was done by practical men. There is no absolute proof that Shakespeare or Ben Jonson or Marlowe wrote for an especial actor ; but

any *practical* dramatist will, I venture to think, confess that he is always seen at his best when writing for a great artist whose capacity he has sounded, and whose power and peculiarities are known to him. *Consciously or unconsciously, the trained and skilled dramatist always does this.* He cannot help it. He cannot get away from the personalities that have made themselves famous: they intrude at every written line.

One-part plays are, as a rule, dangerous to write, for the chance of failure is great; while an all-round play, where story predominates over character, is much less risky. But before the dramatist attempts to depict a "full-length" character, he would do well to confine his attention to "half-lengths," and write a play in which no one part stands out with

much greater prominence than another. Managers have told me, when offering a play with a big part in it, that it would be impossible to produce the piece, because such and such a person could not be obtained, and that no one else could "touch" it. Many a good play has been locked up for years, because an actor or actress has not been found to impersonate the principal rôle.

Another point I should like to touch upon is the development of "situation"—that of bringing a person on, or bringing the curtain down, at the right moment. A line too many, or a movement too soon, will often destroy the effect of an act; and it is here that the practical knowledge of the stage is valuable. One can hardly lay down a law for the guidance of the dramatic author on this

head; and, indeed, it must always largely depend upon the author's feeling for effect whether he stand out in this particular branch of the art or not; but much will come with study and experience, and failure will prove a magnificent master. An author learns more by his failures than by his successes: the one humbles and makes him observant, while the other puffs him up and blinds him to all imperfections. But the most deserving dramatic author will have failures enough, and all apart from the merit of his individual work.

This brings me to the conditions (outside the actual play) necessary to ensure success. Many a good piece has been damned by bad acting or a wrongly-selected cast. *It is absolutely necessary to become acquainted with the qualifications of actors and actresses before*

casting a piece. This proper selection of the fittest and the best will lead to the ultimate success of the play far more than the scenery or dresses. It is only through the medium of the actors that success can ever be obtained; therefore, whenever the power of selecting the company is invested in the author, let him see that his characters find fitting interpreters.

Before proceeding with that part of my paper which treats of play production and the cost of the trial *matinée*, I will read to you the valuable contributions to this paper sent to me by Mr. Sydney Grundy and Mr. Pinero. I will read them to you verbatim.

Mr. Grundy writes:

“Dear Calmour,—My method of writing is not rigidly fixed. I am a very quick worker when I once begin, but very slow

at beginning. I never begin until I know how I am going to end. I think roughly and loosely through the story first, then I repeat the process very carefully, bearing the end always in mind, and trying to work up to it. The object of the *first* process being to arrive at a natural result; that of the *second*, to arrive at it dramatically. I used to plan every scene, every entrance and exit, before I began to write; but I find it better now not to go into great detail, for when I have thoroughly warmed up, the details arrange themselves more naturally than I could arrange them beforehand. Every year I make fewer and fewer preliminary memoranda. One side of a single sheet of MS. is now my usual allowance for one act. When once I start writing, I go on and on, morning and evening, till I have done. I cannot do a fixed small quantity per day with mechanical regularity. If I am not interested, I can't do two lines; if I am, I can't stop till I'm tired out. Consequently, my plays are very quickly written;

but when one is finished, I can't do another for a long time. I am a ruthless cutter, but add very little; and my pieces are seldom altered at rehearsal.

"Yours sincerely,

"SYDNEY GRUNDY."

Mr. Pinero writes:

"My dear Calmour,—I think of some people, and live with them until they prove interesting, or otherwise. In the latter case, I cut them; but if their natures, manners, peculiarities, resolve themselves into a story, I try to ascertain if that story will shape into dramatic form. If yes, I construct my play, but only act by act, the second act depending upon the first, the third on the second, and so forth. I make very few notes or plan of dialogue, as I find myself often checked by them; but the whole matter is settled in my mind—or I fancy it is, sometimes to find it isn't. I write in the evening, when there is quiet, and don't dine.

"Most faithfully yours,

"ARTHUR W. PINERO."

III.

And now I come to that concluding portion of my paper which treats of play production.

The author, having completed his play, will next proceed to place it before a manager. Now, it is almost impossible for a tyro in dramatic writing to get a hearing. My first piece, for instance, a farce, written about fifteen years ago, I offered to nearly every comic actor in London at the time. For weeks I waited at the stage-door for the late W. J. Hill. I used to dog his footsteps. After months of flattering hope of immediate production, it ended by my losing or destroying the piece. For

my next production, a two-act Robsonian drama, I enlisted the services of that best friend of young dramatists, Mr. Hermann Vezin. He spoke in the highest terms of the play, and gave me a letter of introduction to Mr. Alexander Henderson, of the Globe; at the same time suggesting that Mr. Shiel Barry would be very fine in the piece. Mr. Barry heard the piece, and was delighted with it. Mr. Henderson did not find an opening. The play was then offered to Mr. Charles Wyndham. He commended the work, but did not produce it. After trying half-a-dozen other managers, I offered it to my old manageress, the late Mrs. Bateman, of Sadler's Wells Theatre. She was very pleased with the piece, but was afraid Mr. Barry's salary would be too high to engage him for a two-

act play; so it was again returned. Having offered it to all the available managers in the two-act form, I condensed it into one. I then read it to the Messrs. Gatti, who expressed themselves as being very pleased with the terrific strength of it, but suggested that I should turn it into a five-act melo-drama. At present, I shrink from that arduous undertaking, but think of converting it into a psychological farce.

The fight against the managerial policy of doubt and the conventionality of dramatic forms has been going on for years. It is no new cry. Fourteen years ago, I joined with others in a crusade against the *curse of happy endings to plays*. We demanded then what is demanded now—to be allowed to exemplify in the brief action of a play the more serious problems of

life. As far back as '79, I finished a piece in which I had drawn an atheist as a principal character. There was nothing really objectionable in such a personage, as treated ; yet the managers (while praising the scheme of the piece) would have nothing to do with my sceptic. One manager offered to buy the play, if I would convert the man and make him a true believer. "Simply make the fellow a conventional character, keeping the same relative value in the dramatic scheme, and I will buy the play," said he. Being very poor, I consented to do this, and soon I am to have the pleasure (or pain) of seeing my emasculated creation strutting and fretting his hour upon the stage.

Such experiences as this most of you have had, and many of you know

that it is much easier to write a tolerably good play than to get a manager to give it his serious attention. It may be that young authors are ignored by managers because they dare not risk exploiting a man who may bring ruin to the theatre; and when it comes to be considered that many managers are not working with a free hand, some excuse may be found for their diffidence. Again, at least half-a-dozen qualities are requisite to distinguish the merit of a play when read. The manager must then of necessity be actor, critic, and public combined. He must have the technical knowledge of the one, the analytical faculty of the other, and, above all, the sympathetic and impartial judgment of the latter. And where is the manager possessing all these qualities? Managers there are

who possess some of the requisite gifts, but not all; and such a *rara avis* the untried author must find if he wish to get a hearing. Let some consolation be found in the fact that many of our most popular authors have had to wait and work and watch for long before they could get a hearing, and at last succeeded only by the merest chance.

As an instance, Mr. W. G. Wills was for years trying to get his first play produced. He has often told me the story—how night after night he would seek the late Benjamin Webster, at the Adelphi, and endeavour to get him to give attention to his MS. of *Ninon*. This play was ultimately produced at the Adelphi some few years ago, and very nearly proved a great success. That it did not succeed as it deserved was not

the fault of the dramatist, nor would anyone capable of giving an opinion have said that the piece was a bad one; and yet it had been offered to many London managers, and invariably refused. So with his *Jane Shore*, a play that ultimately brought a fortune to Wilson Barrett.

Speaking from my own experience, I can honestly say that an author must have the patience of Job and a boundless ambition, to undergo the constant worry, disappointments, and in many cases downright rudeness, attending his earliest efforts to see the light. And, unfortunately, it is not only his earliest efforts that are received with such scant courtesy: plays that have been tested, and not found wanting, may be hawked from theatre to theatre without, in some cases, even the hope of perusal.

After my little piece, *Cupid's Messenger*, had been tried at the Novelty, and had gained the unqualified approval of the press, it was refused by nearly every London manager. And even the success of one play will not always pave the way for the hearing of a second.

Some months ago I sent a play to a manager who was a personal friend of mine. He returned the MS., saying that "he didn't see his way to doing it." A month after the return of the piece I met this genial lessee, and broached the subject of my play. He did not remember having ever received it. I pressed him to hear me read it. He consented, and, upon hearing it, accepted the play. Upon enquiring why he had sent it back unread, he answered: "My dear fellow, when I wrote and said 'it

wouldn't suit me,' I fancied I had read it; but I must have mixed it up with the dozens of other plays I had to return, and sent you the usual answer."

I quote these instances to show to the aspiring dramatist that inattention or polite refusal will assuredly come at first; but by this it must not be inferred that I wish to discourage him. On the contrary, I would advise him to persevere—to get clean copies of his plays made, and, under the advice of some theatrical friend, offer them to the theatre suitable. No doubt a letter, speaking in terms of praise, and regretfully returning the MS., will follow this act; but the aspirant must be bold, and try and try again until his name at least is familiar to managers. Should he ultimately fail in placing

his play, I should advise him to muster his friends and give a morning performance at a theatre. I have had nine plays produced at *matinées*, and what little position I have attained to has been due to these experiments.

The cost of a morning performance is not very great. I had a play tried at the Vaudeville Theatre some years ago, and, although my cast included actors of reputation, my expenses came to only seventy odd pounds. For the benefit of the uninitiated I give the following statement as furnished to me by my acting-manager:—

| | £ | s. | d. |
|------------------------|----|----|----|
| License for play . . . | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Rent of theatre . . . | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| Salaries . . . | 28 | 4 | 6 |
| Messenger . . . | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Advertisements . . . | 7 | 3 | 6 |

| | £ | s. | d. |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|----|
| Willing and Co. (posting) . | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Nagle (boardmen) . . . | 2 | 16 | 0 |
| Carpenters | 3 | 8 | 4 |
| Aubert (printing) . . . | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Austin and Rogers (for floral decorations) | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Lyon, S. (extra furniture) . | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Clarkson (wigs) | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| Band | 3 | 5 | 0 |
| Money and check takers . | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Properties | 0 | 17 | 6 |
| Cleaners and dressers . . | 0 | 7 | 0 |
| Gasman | 0 | 4 | 6 |
| Simmonds (for hire of cos- tume) | 0 | 10 | 0 |
| Total | £72 | 6 | 6 |

The production of *The Widow Winsome* at the Criterion cost me about £90; and, later, the trial of *Cyrene* at the Avenue cost over a hundred. But both of these were costume plays, and in the former

case £17 and in the latter £27 had to be paid for the hire and purchase of dresses. The original production of *The Amber Heart*—with the theatre rent free—cost me £200, but out of that I spent some £80 on advertising, an absurdly large sum to spend upon one performance. With the aid of a fine company, I have in nearly every case got my money back.

But the young author must not give a performance with the delusive hope that he will get his money back from the general public. If he be fortunate enough to get his friends to cover his expenses by taking tickets, so much the better; but the paying playgoers do not come to see new plays produced at *matinées*. The one great drawback to the experimental performance is the difficulty of get-

ting the company together; and, having got them together, to induce them to attend the rehearsals. As I have said elsewhere, the whole system of *matinée* rehearsals is carried on in a too free-and-easy manner. A will come, but B will not; B will come, but A will not; C, who has a most important part, will not come when A and B do manage to get together. He will probably send a telegram saying that he is ill. I have received three letters and four telegrams in a company of twelve people, and have had to read out all the other parts myself in order to give the remaining five some notion of the play. That is the curse of the *matinée* system.

Then, again, the untried author must attend rehearsals prepared to find a gentle but firm antagonism

practised by the members of the company in all matters relating to stage direction. He must not wince at the new readings given to his pet speeches by the masters of the situation; he must even learn to smile when he is told that "the stuff" he has written may get pulled through by able interpretation. In saying this there is no offence meant to the author—none at all. It is simply the paternal manner of showing him how helpless he is out of leading strings.

But upon the proper conduct of rehearsals depends the ultimate success of the play. *A play is not really finished until the last rehearsal.* Personally, I have always stage-managed my own productions; and I feel that to the proper selection of the cast, and to the careful working out of my ideas upon the stage,

I owe most of my success. I have always found at rehearsals that actors and actresses of the first rank have been delighted to have the parts gone over with them, and are most thankful for any hint; but with actors and actresses of large ambitions and small ability I have found it the very reverse. However, a few seasons, under strict stage-managers, make it clear to these ambitious novices that they can never know too much of the dramatic art.

In concluding my paper, I may say that there was never a better opportunity for aspiring dramatic authors than the present, and anyone with the true instinct should spare nothing in its cultivation and leave no effort untried to get a hearing. I have spoken of a few of the difficulties attending dramatic work,

but neither disappointment nor failure should deter the man who feels and knows that he will yet do something as a playwright.

But whatever style of play the young author elects to write, let him work at it with all his heart, uninfluenced by monetary considerations, and let him try to produce that which shall represent the best of its kind. A domestic drama illustrating humble life may be made as complete a work of art as a tragic play in poetic form. Teniers and Ostade are as true artists as Raphael and Corregio. Above all, let the youthful dramatist learn to depend upon his own observation and experience of Nature for his dramatic scheme of plot and characterisation. Let him live with, and grow to love, the personages he draws, making the best

of them a part of himself. Then he will accept good or evil fortune, praise or censure, with equal thanks; and, in times of failure and distress, he will find some solace in communing with these love-children of his brain—children that may live to plead his cause with posterity long after he (their creator) has mingled with the dust.

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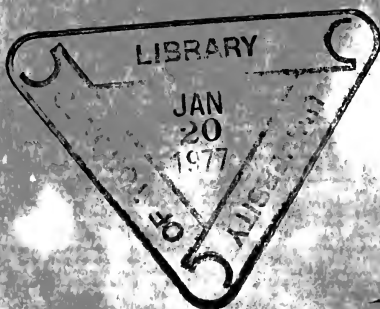
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